

Universities and Communities Must Collaborate to Reduce Binge Drinking

BY MICHAEL MARTIN

This past school year, the deaths of at least seven U.S. college students have been tied directly to the excessive consumption of alcohol.

Tragically, the deaths included those of two **New Mexico State University** students: Steven Judd and Christopher Berry. Both were celebrating birthdays; both were off campus; both suffered alcohol poisoning. Both deaths sent the campus into a state of mourning and disbelief.

Several years ago, my colleague Graham Spanier, president of **Penn State University**, called binge drinking the No. 1 issue on college campuses across the United States. Just recently, the World Health Organization pointed to binge drinking as a priority health concern worldwide.

We at NMSU certainly concur.

The binge drinking epidemic cries out for a response, and most certainly, colleges and universities have a role to play in shaping this response. At NMSU, as at other institutions, the campus community has struggled to determine what that role should be and how best to play it.

By the time of Chris Berry's death in March, a task force already had formed at NMSU to find a way to help our young people make better choices in the way they live their lives. As one deeply troubled faculty member put it, "I don't want to attend another funeral for one of our students."

Yet for all our anguish, it was and is clear to us that with few exceptions public universities cannot intervene directly in the private lives of students. Most are adults, many live off campus, many resent or resist attempts to dictate or modify their behavior.

But what we know we can do is provide what we do best—education.

With innovative help from members of our English faculty and our technology team, NMSU is integrating an alcohol education segment into our freshman English course. As many as 90 percent of our students will be exposed to this education via a WebCT program along with guided readings and class discussions. Peer counselors will visit the classes to help with those discussions.

But even this—along with a student peer counseling program, numerous awareness campaigns, and high-profile visits from state officials to help us get the message across that too much alcohol can kill—is only part of what we have decided to do in the wake of these tragedies.

We decided we must take the lead in bringing the discussion of binge drinking and underage drinking to the community at large.

There are some risks attached to a university taking such a step, but we knew a combined effort would be the most effective. To quote a participant: "If not us, then who? If not here,

then where? If not now, then when?"

So, we convened a community forum that included our local public schools, law enforcement, community, business leaders, and faith community to discuss what we can do together to prevent binge drinking and to better respond in those hopefully rare cases when it occurs. We included Christine Berry, the mother of Chris Berry, and a representative of the Judd family.



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This initial meeting drew a standing-room-only crowd. It focused on sharing perspectives on the extent and nature of the problem as seen from several perspectives and on "inventorying" the programs and resources avail-

able community-wide to address it. Future forums will focus on coalition-building and program innovations to meet the unique challenges at our university and in the surrounding community. We have continued to meet with local health officials and activists. And other universities in the region have expressed interest in joining our efforts.

Binge drinking won't stop on its own. Universities have a role to play in addressing the problem, but the new social order limits what universities can do alone. A truly effective response will involve the whole community in comprehensive efforts and innovations aimed first at preventing binge drinking but also at ensuring quick, accurate emergency medical attention when it does occur. And finally, but probably most significantly, we know peer interventions and peer responsiveness will likely be the most successful efforts we can make.

As Christine Berry said following the death of her son: "Friends must take care of friends." This means young people need to know the dangers of excessive alcohol consumption and avoid it. In those rare but significant times when they don't, their friends must know the symptoms related to alcohol poisoning and have an emergency response system at hand to deal with it.

We may never know how effective this massive response to the problem has been. How do you know if you stopped one student from taking that fatal drink?

But the prospect that we have saved even one life makes all of it an appropriate path to take. **U**

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